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Description of problematic situations for students referring to the psychological support center of the St. Petersburg State University

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Abstract

The Article based on 390 cases of the psychological consulting practice describes the content of different types of problematic situations typical for students depending on the year of study (age) and chosen profession. The features of the most important (actual) problematic situations with which students in sciences and humanities refer are shown. The relation between the readiness for work with a professional psychologist and the age, sex and the faculty of the student is discovered.

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Keywords: Problematic situation; psychological aid to students; readiness to receive psychological aid.

1. Introduction

During their study at the University students face a lot of issues of various types: adaptation to a new place, a higher level of responsibility due to higher learning requirements, establishment of relationships with fellow students, search for and building of close partnerships, disappointment in the chosen profession etc. To solve these kinds of issues, special psychological support services are often established in higher education institutions to render professional psychological aid.

In the West the idea of student services, psychological consulting and development programs for students underwent fast growth since 1940s (Canon, 1988; Winston & Creamer, 1997). The first psychological support services for students in Russia emerged 20 years ago. Currently such services work at more than 60 higher education institutions of Russia (Slavogorodskaya, 2012), one of which is based at the Saint Petersburg State University.

We should notice that there is no single concept for rendering psychological aid to students. However a review of the available literature (Kholmogorova, 2010; Nabatnikov, 2011) allows revealing a number of common fields of psychological work with student and identifying a number of features typical for a certain educational institution. The

growth in the number of references (in the first academic year of the Service's operation (2003/2004) the number of individual psychological consultations was 112 totally while 24 to 50 consultations per week i.e. 1000 consultations annually on the average are rendered currently) and expansion of the range of problematic situations evidences demand for accumulation and realization of the collected information about types and features of problematic situations to develop effective strategies for rendering psychological aid to students.

2. Problem Statement

A peculiarity of operation of psychological consulting services in Russia is commitment of their specialists mainly to solution of issues related to the learning process (e.g. readiness for study, adaptation in first years of study, including for students from other cities, fear of failure etc.) (Ivanova, 2010). On the other side, psychological support services are often established based on the nature of problems or the category of students. For example, we can see services aimed at prevention of different types of deviant behavior (alcohol addiction, smoking, feeding behavior disorders), career guidance services or social psychological services intended for adaptation of first-year students or national minority students. The specialization of the educational institution also contributes to differentiation of services. In each of the versions described above work of the Service is aimed at solution of narrow tasks. But in the situation of increasing demands and expansion of the range of problematic situations this approach shows low efficiency. Moreover only one or two specialists work at such services.

As Bishop says (1992) for work with students we must take into consideration the key tendency of this age group. These are persistent changes in the student subculture. The behavior of students varies with each next generation. Employees of consulting centers at universities notice the increasing number of students with serious psychological problems and the general increase in severity of such problems (Sharkin, 1997; Gorchakova & al's, 2013). In this regard we must focus not only on learning problems of students but on regular monitoring of problems students refer with.

Therefore a psychological support service must be organized in such a manner to provide effective aid to students in a broad and actual range of problems.

In connection with the problems described above we have a number of questions relating to the psychological support service: how must it be organized, which problems will their workers face in addition to learning issues? What type of specialists must we engage: narrowly specialized or more universally trained? What kind of aid must be rendered: long-term or issue-oriented? We must take into consideration that such services usually engage voluntary servants, and on the other side we can't know the level of readiness of the very students to accept advice under the "student as client" pattern.

3. Research Questions: Can we identify main features of problematic situations for students in sciences and humanities? Are there any relations between the profession chosen, year of study and readiness for psychological work?

4. Purpose of the Study: To review and identify features of problematic situations for students referring to the student psychological support service for psychological consultation. Also:

- to identify, which problematic situations are most actual for students and which are least.
- to describe typical features of problematic situations depending on the specialization chosen (sciences or humanities), age and year of study
- to identify the level of readiness for psychological work depending on the specialization chosen (sciences or humanities), age and year of study.

For our purposes a problematic situation means impossibility to satisfy a strong aspiration (appeal, need, incentive) when the roots of the problem are located in the psyche of the person, in his internal world (Linde, 2009).

4. Research Methods

4.1. Participants: the study has been participated by students of the Philology, Philosophy, History, Free Arts, Biology, Geographic, Economics, Medicine, Mathematics, Law, Chemistry and Physics Faculties asking for psychological aid from the Service in the period since November, 2012 to January, 2014. Totally 390 persons including 45 males and 345 females. The age varies from 14 to 54 y.o., the average age is 22 years. Aged participants were the SPbSU's students in advanced vocational training.

4.2. Research Methods and Instruments: to receive information on peculiarities of problematic situations of students, content – analysis of the database and references to the Service for psychological aid as described by the consultants was performed.

The main method for mathematical and statistical treatment is frequency distribution analysis.

4.3. Procedure: The procedure was as follows: after each session the consultant filled in a special form containing the following information: age, sex, year of study, number of visits, type of the problematic situation, description of the client, further actions planned by the consultant, additional information at the consultant's discretion. Then the center's administrator entered the data into the digital database developed specially for the Service. The system is located at the SPbSU's server and has a high security level for personal information. Only the administrator has an access to the base. All personal information allowing identification of clients (their names and surnames) was removed. Then the data was processed based on mathematical and statistical methods. We should notice that students referring to the Service may choose their user names which additionally ensures their anonymity and confidentiality of the information received.

5. Findings

Analysis of the results included the following stages:

- Description of the client base (sex, age, faculty);
- Content description of problematic situations most often fostering students to refer to the Service (depending on the sex, age and specialization chosen)
- Evaluation of the level of readiness for psychological work (depending on the specialization, year of study and sex).

Comparative analysis of the number of references to the psychological support service of the SPbSU depending on the sex, age and faculty.

The review of the client base shows that young women refer for psychological aid much oftener than young men do. Only 12% of the processed requests were from young men. 88% of the references fell on young women.

Age relations reflect the following tendency (Fig. 1). 2nd and 3rd year students (19-20 y.o.) refer for psychological aid most often. The second place belongs to senior students (22-23 y.o.). The most seldom clients are postgraduate students or students in advanced vocational training. Therefore services of psychological consultants are mostly demanded by the so-called "medium layer", when students have adapted to academic activities and received the first learning experience but have much time till their graduation.

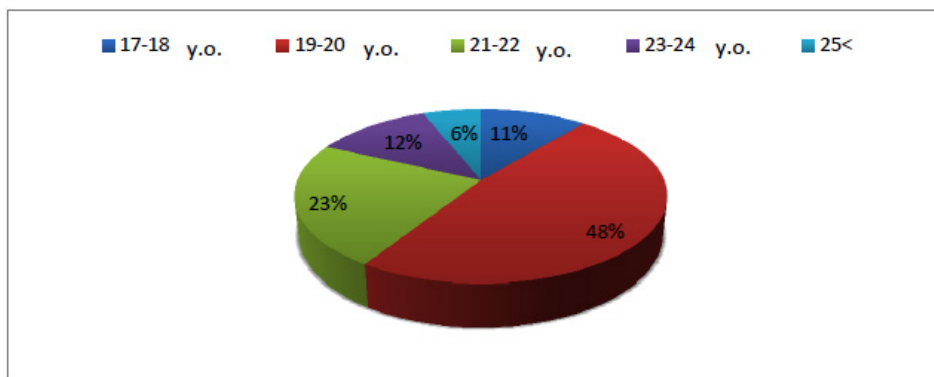


Fig. 1. The number of references to the psychological support service depending on the age (in %).

The distribution by faculties evidences that students in humanities referred to the psychological support service more often than ones in sciences (68% vs 32%). The most often clients of students in humanities are students in Psychology (46%) and in Philology (28%). Students of the Economics and Laws Faculties are the least often clients (4% and 4%). Students in mathematics (24%) and in biology (20%) are most often clients among students in sciences. Students of the Medicine Faculty are the most seldom clients (8%).

Description of problematic situations of students visiting the Psychological Support Service of the SPbSU The review of the content of psychological consultations has shown that so called “typical problematic situations” notable for many students irrespectively of the age, sex and specialization chosen exist. We have grouped these problematic situations into types and built a hierarchy according to the level of their actuality and importance for students.

Situations related to personality issues hold the first place (34%). Mainly we can see self-rejection, low self-estimate together with a high aspiration level, inferiority complex, insecurity, and dependence on other people’s opinions, perfectionism or (less frequently) the search for a sense of life.

The second place belongs to issues related to inter-personal relations (27%). Solitude is the most common problem. Solitude may have both a social character (narrowness or insufficiency or absolute absence of intercourses, the fear of exposure and failure to support contacts with new people), and an emotional character (fear that other people do not accept you and reject you, lack of deep links with other people). This type of problematic situations also includes troubles in relations with the partner, including troubles of joint residence, conflicts and quarrels, sexual problems.

The third place is held by relations with parents (19%). Mainly we see complaints about a lack of attention from the parents, or about too strict requirements or hyper-care, as well as fear of disappointing parent’s expectations. Also problematic situations including co-dependent relations with one of the parents occurred.

The fourth place is held by problematic situations related to the learning process (14%), the number of which naturally increases during sessions. They cover self-regulation troubles in the examination situation, problems of self-organization and poor academic records, unsatisfactory choice of the profession, fears or menaces of expulsion.

The least frequent reason (6%) to refer to the Service includes such problematic situations as: fears, phobias, anxious and emotional disorders, experience of traumatic events, death of close people, physical and emotional violence, abuse of psychotropic substances etc.

We should notice that apart from the common hierarchy of actual problems reliable differences ($p=0,023$, Mann — Whitney U-test) between students in sciences and humanities (Table 1) exist.

As we can see in Table 1 for students in *sciences* (Chemistry, Biology, Mathematics etc.) the most common problems are personality ones (55%). Mainly self-acceptance problems, low self-satisfaction, low estimate of personal achievements. Learning issues have the second place (24%), including fear of expulsion, poor academic records, issues of self-organization.

Problems related to relations and communication are least frequent (11%). The most common problems of this

kind include complaints about solitude and misunderstanding by others.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of types of problematic situations by the frequency of references to the Psychological Support Service of the SPbSU (occurrence frequency in %).

Type of problematic situation	Sciences	Humanities
Personality problems	55%	25%
Study-related problems	24%	7%
Relations and communications problems	11%	57%

Students in *humanities* (Psychology, Philosophy, Philology Faculties etc) show a little other picture.

Mainly these students referred with complaints about relations-related issues (57%). Mostly problems with partners, parents and fellow students occurred.

Personality problems have the second place by their frequency (25%). However contrary to students in sciences personality problems of students in humanities were associated with unrealistic goals, too high self-requirements, narcissus complexes.

Only 7% of references of students in humanities include study-related complaints.

We have also revealed differences between the age intervals and the types of problematic situations students refer with. In other words, problematic situations typical for one age and not actual for another exist.

E.g. *17-18 y.o. students* (1st year) situations with interpersonal relations complaints (52%) dominate. Mainly the issue is relations with close people (parents, partners, friends), experience of solitude feeling, troubles related with establishment of relations with fellow students. Sexual problems also occur. Personality problems have the second place (21%). Mainly these include: self-estimate problems, self-satisfaction problems, self-rejection. Study-related problems (21%). They include anxiety and fears related to first exams, doubts in the chosen profession. The other types of problematic situations (e.g. experience of traumatic events, social problems etc.) occurred much less frequently.

For the age from *19 to 20 y.o.* (about 2nd and 3rd years of study) relations with other people remain an actual problem (35%) of the total amount of references by students of this age. However the context of references expands. Problematic situations related to conflict settlement (involving parents, hostel mates, fellow students) are added. Then personality problems follow (26%). Here we can see problems with unsatisfactory appearance including anorexia and bulimia cases. The third place (7%) are held by two type of problematic situations: a) study-related problems: doubts in the sense of further study and dissatisfaction with the knowledge received, disappointment in the chosen profession; and b) experience of traumatic events (death of close people, leave from partners, friends, parents. As a whole the range of problematic situations expands.

The age interval from *21 to 22 y.o.* (about 4th – 5th years) personality problems dominate (33%). Mainly they are associated with dissatisfactory personal achievements, excessive aspirations, unrealistic goals, fear of being estimated by other people, struggles to confirm other people's expectations. Interpersonal relations become less significant (29%) and students are mainly focused on discussion of conflict situations. The range of actual problems expands still more: anxiety disorders, phobias, abuse of psychotropic substances, suicide attempts, violence cases are added.

In the age period from 23 y.o. and older personality and interpersonal problems still remain important (21% and 20% correspondingly). However these problems cannot be considered dominating.

Estimate of the level of readiness to refer to the psychological support service of the SPbSU

The readiness of a person to refer for psychological support is one of the common issues. The majority of the Russian population doubts in such necessity preferring discussion of problems with friends or close people. People often prefer to face a problem without aid from other people.

We have tried to analyze data available in the base in terms of students' readiness for psychological work.

We estimate the level of readiness for psychological work by two parameters: 1) the number of consultations; 2) realism of expectations from the visit to the psychological consultant.

Figures 2 and 3 show the data related to the number of psychological consultations (within the context of a single problem) for students of different faculties.

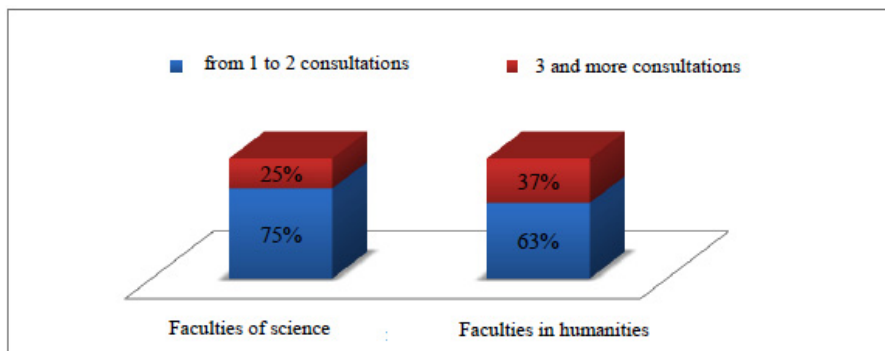


Fig. 2. Comparison of duration of psychological work between students in sciences and humanities (in %).

Figure 2 clearly shows that students in humanities show higher readiness for psychological work as compared with students in sciences. Mainly they do not restrict themselves with one or two visits remain for further work on a problematic situation and are ready to move from psychological consulting to personality therapy.

Among students in humanities students of the Psychology Faculty enjoy the highest level of readiness for psychological work (Fig. 3). This fact can be easily explained both by the content of their study and corresponding incentives (aspiration to understand themselves and others). Moreover students in psychology are less exposed to fear and shame before opinions of other people of their visits to psychologists. Students in sciences remain for continuous work less frequently and, therefore, are less ready for psychological work. They rather expect advice from the psychologist containing a certain algorithm and when they fail to get it they leave. They are also less informed about the essence of duties of the psychological consultant, therefore, they on the one hand they want to meet a person who explains them everything about them, and on the other hand they are afraid of it. As a result a kind of a trap emerges: during the consultation they or are very afraid of trusting another person, or wish to outplay the consultant in an intellectual sense.

Students in mathematics show the highest level of readiness for psychological work among students in sciences (Fig. 3).

From 1 to 2 consultations, 3 and more consultations

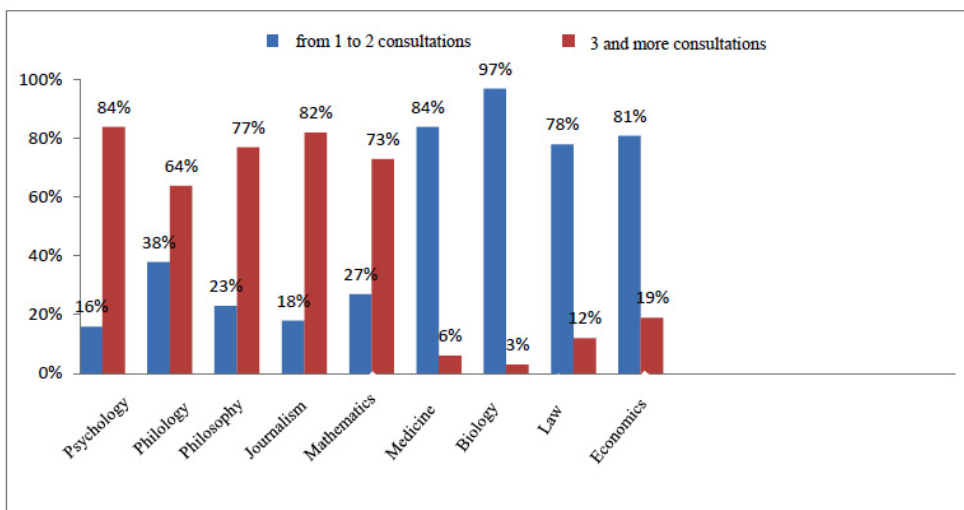


Fig. 3. The level of readiness for psychological work for students from different faculties.

It is interesting to notice that the readiness for psychological work (3 and more consultations) has different grounds for students in sciences and humanities. The comparative analysis of the type of problematic situations has shown that students in sciences rather continue the consulting process while working on acute crisis situations. Students in humanities sometimes continue visiting consultations just due to curiosity: “just to understand myself”, “just interesting how a psychologist works”.

Table 2 shows the number of students of different ages (years) visiting only one or two consultations or staying for a longer work. It also demonstrates that two age intervals can be identified when the readiness for psychological work increases: the period from 19 to 20 y.o. (about 2nd -3rd year of study) and from 21 to 22 y.o. (about 4th -5th year of study). Students of these years of study refer for psychological support more frequently (figure 1) and remain for psychological work for a longer period. Students older than 23 y.o. (for the University they include postgraduate students and students in advanced vocational training) refer for psychological support less frequently and rather restrict themselves with 1 or 2 consultations.

Table 2. Readiness for psychological work for students of the SPbSU depending on age.

Age	1-2 consultations	3 and more consultations
17-18 (1 year)	89%	11%
19-20 (2-3 years)	52%	48%
21-22 (4-5 years)	77%	23%
23-24 (postgraduates and 1st year PhD students)	88%	12%
25-26 (PhD students and students in advanced vocational training)	94%	6%
27< (PhD students and students in advanced vocational training)	83%	17%

The average level of readiness for psychological aid for 1st year students (17 – 18 y.o.) may be caused by the fact that they are in the process of adaptation to new conditions and involved in sessions, preparations for exercises, understanding of new requirements. Psychological consultations are not so actual for them as the current learning process is. They try to cope with their problems by their own.

6. Discussion

Differences in the frequency of referring to the SPbSU's Psychological Support Service according to the gender criterion reflect a common international pattern. As a result of the meta-analysis of 5713 references of students and postgraduate students for psychological support performed by Nam S.K., Chu H.J., Lee M.K. (2010), it was reliably established that young women are more inclined to refer for psychological support than young men. This pattern is also confirmed by a number of other studies (Vogel & al.'s 2007; Shechtman, Vogel & Maman, 2010), as well as by earlier results (Fischer & Farina, 1995). It can be explained by the fact that young women have more positive attitude toward psychological support and more actively demonstrate their wishes to refer to a professional psychologist. Men show a high level of self-stigma and public stigma (Vogel & al.'s, 2007; Eisenberg & al.'s, 2009; Topkaya, 2014) due to the fact that they are more dependent on a negative public opinion likely to emerge should they refer for psychological support (Hackler, 2007). The both parameters, self-stigma and public stigma, are strictly linked with indicators of a subjective norm and behavioral control demonstrating the level of the dependence of a man on social attitudes. The Russian population demonstrates high importance of subjective norms and behavioral control. However, as Ajzen reasonably notices (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005), these factors have a negative correlation with the readiness for receiving professional psychological support. The lower the level of the subjective norm and behavioral control are, the higher belief is that a third person's aid is necessary. Belief of a person in his ability to cope with his problem on his own prevents referring for professional psychological support.

The study of Topkaya (2014) confirms our results that students in humanities are more inclined to refer for psychological support and more open for continuous psychological work and therapy than undergraduate and

postgraduate students in sciences. At the same time our results relating to the age factor contradict results as shown in the study by Mackenzie, Gekoski & Knox (2006). In their opinion, older participants are more inclined to refer for psychological support, as they are more realistic in their needs and less biased toward it. Our data evidences an opposite pattern, which can be related to the Russian mentality. The spread of professional psychological aid has a relatively short history in Russia. It is why older people are less used to it.

We can also notice the difference in the content of references for psychological support for students of the SPbSU and results of other studies. Moller-Leimkuhler (2002) states that students rather refer for support related to their emotional problems. The studies by Ivanova (2010) and Slavgorodsky (2012) state that the most common reason for reference is issues related to the learning process and adaptation. Our results show that the psychological content of a reference depends on the age/year of study and faculty. A similar situation occurs with the reason to refer for psychological support. They differ depending on the age (year of study), sex and faculty but are not related to the type of a problematic situation. Similar results have been received by Kaltayeva (2011) on a sample of students from other higher education institutions (N= 167), as well as by Krasnova & Kholmogorova (2011) (N= 140). It confirms the idea by Timothy R. Hess & Terence J. G. Tracey (2013) of existence of an invariant approach for reference for psychological support even when addressing very different problems (anxiety, depression, career choice, alcohol use etc.). The attitude toward psychological support preceding the wish to refer for it is more important than the content of the problematic situation.

7. Conclusions

Personality problems are the most common content for students' complaints not depending on the faculty, sex and age. They include self-rejection as a personality, low estimate combined with a high level of aspiration, inferiority complex, insecurity and dependence on other people's opinions, perfectionism and the search for a sense of life. Study related problems were the least important for students in humanities, and relations and communications-related problems were the least important for students in sciences.

Communication problems are most common for students from the 1st to 4th year of study (19-21 y.o.). The content of complaints expands from year to year. While solitude and problems of establishment of relationships with fellow students are typical for 1st year students, conflict situations are added to them at the 3rd year. Personality problems prevail for graduates.

We can identify a period when the readiness for work with a professional psychologist grows. This is the age from 19 to 20 years (2nd – 3rd years of study). Students of these years are most inclined to refer for psychological support and remain for psychological work for a longer period. At the same time the reasons and severity of the problematic situation do not impact the intention to refer for professional psychological support.

8. The further directions of research: the study of the content of problematic situations students refer with to the Psychological Support Service allows better understanding of the internal world of students, their feelings, and attitudes to the reality, of their actual issues and psychological problems. At the same time, we can notice peculiarities of the readiness for psychological work. It raises the issue of development of programmes to promote professional psychological support. The estimate of psychological efficiency of such programmes can include indicators of higher demand on psychological support by students needing it and decrease in the levels of self-stigma and public stigma for students having strong negative attitudes toward professional psychological support, especially for among young men and students in sciences. We have to consider development of a climate within the University where reference for psychological support is regarded as relevant and socially desirable.

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